

Changes in the Sexual Orientation of Six Heterosexual Male-to-Female Transsexuals

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Researchers traditionally have assumed that sex reassignment procedures do not change sexual orientation. Of 20 transsexuals of various types that were interviewed, 6 heterosexual male-to-female transsexual respondents reported that their sexual orientation had changed since transitioning from male to female. These respondents stated that before transitioning they had been sexually orientated towards females. After transitioning, these same respondents reported that they were sexually orientated towards males. Five of the six respondents reported having various sexual encounters with males since transitioning. The respondents explained the changes in their sexual orientation as part of their emerging female gender identities. Three of the respondents claimed that the use of female hormones played a role in changing their sexual orientation. It did not appear that the respondents' post-transitional sexual attractions towards males were similar to autogynephilic images and fantasies described by Blanchard (1991).

KEY WORDS: transsexualism; sexual orientation; gender dysphoria; retrospective study.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual orientation, a fundamental aspect of personality, is considered to be the result of prenatal or early life events by many researchers (Bell et al., 1981; Whitam and Mathy, 1986; Money, 1988; Diamond and Sigmundson, 1997). Once determined, sexual orientation is thought to be difficult, if not impossible, to change. Sexual orientation is recognized as an important demarcation among transsexuals, implying fundamental behavioral and developmental

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differences among them (Blanchard *et al.*, 1987). Most researchers on transsexualism assume that sexual orientation remains consistent throughout the sex reassignment process. Although postoperative transsexuals may experience dramatic changes in anatomy, personal relationships, and social status, their sexual orientation is not presumed to change (Benjamin, 1966; Blanchard, 1985; Blanchard *et al.*, 1987; Diamond and Sigmundson, 1997). Relying on retrospective accounts, this paper describes the changes in the sexual orientation of six male-to-female transsexuals during the sex reassignment process. Such changes have rarely been investigated (Tully, 1992) and present a challenge to current understandings of sexual orientation. The details of these changes in sexual orientation and the respondents' explanations for such changes are reported below.

METHODS

In 1996, in-depth interviews were obtained from a nonclinical, non-random sample of 20 transsexuals in a Southwestern city. The participants interviewed lived full-time as members of the opposite sex and were in the process of obtaining or had already obtained sex reassignment surgery. Half of the respondents were postoperative at the time of the study. The respondents were assigned to two groups, homosexual and nonhomosexual, based upon their original sexual orientation as suggested by Blanchard (1989) and their biological sex (e.g. homosexual male-to-female transsexual). The nonhomosexual group contained 13 subjects, 12 heterosexual male-to-female respondents and 1 heterosexual female-to-male respondent. The homosexual group contained 7 subjects, 4 homosexual male-to-female respondents and 3 homosexual female-to-male respondents. The respondents were asked to discuss, among other things, their sexual orientation and romantic relationships. The interviews were recorded, with the subjects' permission, and transcribed. The subjects' remarks below, using pseudonyms, are the results of those retrospective interviews. The researcher also attended numerous meetings of The Wild Flowers, a local gender support group, during which the observations noted below were made.

THE RESPONDENTS' ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

While 14 of the 20 transsexual respondents reported no changes in their sexual orientation during their transition from one sex to another, 6 respondents reported that their sexual orientation had changed during this time. These 6 respondents were heterosexual male-to-female transsexuals; 4 were postoperative and 2 were preoperative at the time of the study. Before

their transitions from male to female, these subjects remembered having been sexually oriented towards females. None of the 6 considered themselves to have been gay or reported any episodes of homosexual behavior. Five of the 6 had been married to heterosexual women. One was the biological father to three children. After transitioning, these same subjects reported being sexually oriented towards males. Of these 6 respondents, only 2 were involved in a sexual relationship with a male at the time of the study. Another 3 respondents reported that they had been involved in sexual relationships with males since transitioning. Only 1 of the 6 heterosexual male-to-female respondents who had changed their sexual orientation reported never having any sexual contact since transitioning.

Of the two heterosexual male-to-female respondents who were sexually involved with men at the time of the study, one was married to a heterosexual cross-dresser and the other had been dating a heterosexual man for 5 months. Jane, a postoperative transsexual, had been married to Richard for about 6 years at the time she was interviewed. They had met at a meeting of a social support group for heterosexual cross-dressers. Richard, like Jane at the time, was a heterosexual cross-dresser and Jane related that initially she and Richard were just friends. When Jane eventually transitioned into a woman, Richard's friendship developed into romantic interest. Becky had met her boyfriend Cliff during a church service. Becky, who was preoperative at the time of the study, said that Cliff had agreed to wait until she underwent surgery before they had any sexual contact other than kissing. Becky hoped to one day marry Cliff but doubted such a marriage would have the blessings of their church.

Three other heterosexual male-to-female respondents had been involved in romantic relationships with heterosexual males since transitioning although they were not so involved at the time of the study. One postoperative respondent named Sherri had met Scott at a meeting of a social support group for heterosexual cross-dressers. Sherri and Scott became romantically involved after Sherri began to live as a woman full time. Before Sherri had undergone sex reassignment surgery, their sexual contact was limited to petting and fondling. After surgery Sherri found that her feelings for Scott had changed, due to his continued unemployment and slovenly personal habits, and she terminated their relationship. Sherri emphasized that her sexual desires for males remained strong despite this break-up. Sherri stated that she wanted to find a man to marry and take to her 20th high school class reunion. Luann, who had been postoperative for less than a year at the time of the study, had dated several heterosexual men from her college while she was still preoperative. She said that the men she had dated did not know of her transsexual status and because of this she did not allow the relationships to develop. Patty, preoperative at the time of

the study, had dated a heterosexual man she had met at her place of employment. The man had been unaware of Patty's transsexual status when they started dating. Patty said that because of her preoperative status, the sexual contact between the two had been limited to kissing and petting. Patty said that the man broke off the romantic aspect of their relationship after Patty disclosed her transsexual status to him.

One postoperative heterosexual male-to-female respondent whose sexual orientation changed from woman to man reported that she had not been involved in any sexual activities with men since transitioning. Penny related that, as a heterosexual man, her interest in sexual activity with women had been rather low until she reached her mid-20s. Penny said that during this period of her life she "shut down" sexually and felt almost no sexual interests. She attributed her low interest in sexuality to her gender dysphoria. Penny remained shut down sexually until her 40s, when Penny began to transition into a woman. Penny stated that she began to notice that her sexual attractions, such as they were, were for men rather than for women. Penny stated she would like to someday be involved in a heterosexual relationship with a man but had no immediate plans to become so involved.

THE RESPONDENTS' EXPLANATIONS FOR THE CHANGES IN THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Pretransitional Orientation to Females

Five of the 6 respondents, whose sexual orientation had changed, reported that their pretransitional sexual orientation towards females was an attempt to conform to traditional masculine gender role expectations. Sherri's explanation for her previous sexual orientation went as follows:

No, I was always attracted to women [before transitioning]. This is where you can make the mind fit the situation. The mind is a wonderful thing, you can make it work or not work. Just because of the way society is, if you look like a man you have to act like a man or you are totally ostracized. If you are really a man in quote unquote normal society, you do the male thing; acting like a male includes being with a female.

Patty, who did not have much sexual experience as a man, married to appear "normal": "I married to be normal; you know I thought maybe this would help me be normal. She was a good friend and we liked each other." Jane also married to conform to traditional gender expectations: "I tried to do what society said I was supposed to do. So I tried and I went through marriage and the whole nine yards and finally it just didn't work."

Becky related that her sexual orientation towards women was a concession to traditional gender role expectations:

I got out of the military service at the age of 23 and I realized that I had only had two intimate relationships at that time; both had been with women due to the peer pressure from my family and society and everything. Both of them were total failures. They were failures because certain parts of me didn't work so good. I got married, another one of my attempts to be quote normal.

Penny remembered her heterosexual relationships as an attempt to fit in:

I don't know, I was just trying to be like everyone else, fit in, going through the same things that everybody else does and not doing too well with the women. I mean I had a satisfying sexual relationship but there was always something wrong in the back of my mind that seemed to up the relationship.

One respondent, Luann, explained her orientation towards females had little to do with sexuality as she stated:

I think that I was genuinely attracted to women in my earlier years for certain reasons. There were certain aspects of women that I was attracted to. . . . I do understand why I was attracted to women before; it wasn't for sex like in a typical male female relationship, it was for companionship and for the closeness and friendship. Those are the aspects of it that attracted me to women. I wasn't ready to jump my wife's bones every time I had the chance, I wasn't like that.

Luann's orientation towards females was an expression of her emerging feminine gender identity which is why she sought them as companions and friends rather than as sexual objects. According to five of the 6 heterosexual male-to-female respondents whose sexual orientation had changed, their sexual orientation for females were attempts to conform to traditional masculine gender role expectations. One of the 6 such respondents stated that her orientation for females was an expression of her emerging feminine gender identity and had little to do with sexuality.

Posttransitional Orientation Towards Males

The 6 respondents explained that their posttransitional sexual orientation to males represented an aspect of their female gender identities which they could not express or did not know existed before transitioning. All of these respondents reported being sexually oriented towards females before transitioning and five had been married to heterosexual women. None of these respondents had identified as being gay or reported having any homosexual experiences before transitioning. Becky commented on her sexual orientation after transitioning:

Over a period of time I've realized that I must be with a man, that is what is most comfortable for me. I realize that the very few relationships that I have had have been with women. I love my ex-wife but I'm not in love with my ex-wife. Cliff is a different story. I'm in love with him, I have felt things that I have never felt before. I know that I can love a man and love him better than any woman he's ever been with.

Jane's sexual orientation began to change as her gender changed:

I went from being completely heterosexual as a man to completely heterosexual as a woman and I was very comfortable with both sides when I was in those roles. As I progressed on the gender side [of her personality] I experimented with the sexuality side to find out where I was comfortable. As I was accepted at various points [in her gender transition] I became comfortable at that point sexually so my sexuality kind of rode with my gender. . . . Maybe I was bisexual to start with although I question whether I could be comfortable with a woman. At this point I don't know.

As Jane transitioned from male to female, she began to acknowledge her sexual orientation to males. When Sherri began to transition into a woman she was able to let her sexual orientation to males emerge, in part due to her use of female hormones, discussed in further detail below. As Sherri related:

They [the hormones] gave me the emotions to go with the feelings and let the true emotions come out because before [the transition] I wasn't attracted to guys but then again how much of this was society? I couldn't be attracted to a guy when I was a guy because that would make me gay. How much of that made me heterosexual as a man? . . . The way that I look at myself now is that I am a normal heterosexual female with slight lesbian tendencies. Right now if a very handsome man and a very attractive lady walked up, I would take the guy. Part of that choice is society. I know, it's "normal." That's what society dictates as normal and I want to be a normal wife so I am attracted to men.

Penny, whose sexual interest had always been rather low, transitioned with assumption that she would remain sexually attracted to females. Penny found that her sexual orientation had changed after transitioning and that she was now attracted to males.

Two of the 6 subjects remembered having had passing sexual attractions to males before transitioning but had never acted upon these desires and had tried to suppress such attractions. After these respondents had transitioned into women, they were able to acknowledge their sexual orientation to males. Luann recalled having sexual thoughts involving males before transitioning:

There were times before I transitioned when I thought I was maybe gay because I was actually having some thoughts of other guys like in high school and that. Until I realized I wasn't having gay thoughts, I was having male to female thoughts but I was thinking of being with the guys as a female.

These sexual attractions, Luann eventually realized, were an aspect of her emerging feminine gender identity. Luann felt unable to express these sexual attractions until she had transitioned:

I was also attracted to men but I held back, I kept the reins on that kind of emotion from coming out. You just make yourself not do that. I had a couple of experiences where I never acted on them [sexual orientation to males]. But they occupied my thoughts quite a bit. You tend to keep that in check and I think that I would consider myself bisexual in a way. Maybe I used to be bisexual more and now that I have been able to straighten my life out [through sex reassignment] I am able to let those emotions [sexual feelings for males] come out.

Luann could not express her sexual orientation for males, which she considered an aspect of her female gender identity, until she had transitioned into a woman. Patty said that her sexual orientation to males did not begin in earnest until she began to transition:

I never thought about guys before I started this whole thing [transsexualism]. I may have had thoughts about it but I immediately stuffed them. But then again I never had a lot of lustful thoughts about women either. But when I transitioned, that changed. I met this guy last year and we fooled around a little bit.

Patty did not consciously acknowledge her sexual orientation for males until she had transitioned. As men, these 6 respondents felt that they had been unable to express or were unaware of the existence of their sexual orientation to males. As their female gender identities emerged, the respondents were able to acknowledge and express this sexual orientation.

THE ROLE OF HORMONES IN THE CHANGES IN SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Three of the heterosexual male-to-female respondents thought that the use of female hormones contributed to their change in sexual orientation. Female hormones are powerful drugs and their effects upon the psychosexual functioning of male-to-female transsexuals are not well understood (Cohen-Kettenis and Gooren, 1992). Presently it is assumed by researchers that the ingestion of female hormones by male-to-female transsexuals does not affect their sexual orientation (Money and Tucker, 1975; Cohen-Kettenis and Gooren, 1992). Three of the respondents in this study, however, thought that the use of female hormones played a role in the change in their sexual orientation. Luann related the following regarding the matter of hormones and sexual orientation:

I don't think I would be as relaxed being with a man without the hormones. Before I ever took hormones, like when I was just starting out and say I was in a make out session with a guy, I just couldn't get comfortable enough to do that. I think

that hormones just get you ever so much more in synch with yourself. They make you feel much more in line.

Sherri, as stated above, thought that the use of female hormones provided emotional depth to her feelings, allowing her "true emotions" (her sexual orientation) toward males to "come out". Patty stated that her use of female hormones had a "big impact" upon her, making it possible for her to be intimate with a male. These three respondents thought that the use of female hormones played a role in changing their sexual orientation.

Much remains to be discovered regarding the effects of hormones upon the psychosexual functioning of transsexual subjects, especially concerning their role in shaping sexual desires. Besides causing changes in physical appearance, the use of female hormones by male-to-female transsexuals has been reported to reduce tension, increase feelings of relaxation, and induce a calming effect upon emotional disturbances (Cohen-Kettenis and Gooren, 1992). Many of these effects were reported by the homosexual and heterosexual male-to-female respondents in this study. Some heterosexual male-to-female transsexuals reported a decrease in their sexual desire but no such decrease was reported by any of the homosexual male-to-female respondents. There were no reports by the other 17 subjects of any changes concerning sexual orientation due to, at least in part, the use of hormones.

The widespread use and extensive knowledge of female hormones on the part of the heterosexual male-to-female subjects confounds attempts to understand their role in shaping the sexual orientation of this group of respondents. The brand names and pharmacological effects of various female hormones were well-known and frequent topics of conversation at meetings of The Wild Flowers, a local gender group. Also discussed among the transsexuals in attendance at The Wild Flowers meetings were the illicit avenues available for obtaining specific hormones as well as strategies for persuading doctors to prescribe certain brands of hormones. At one meeting of The Wild Flowers, two preoperative transsexuals exchanged a number of hormone tablets as each was dissatisfied with their own prescription. One respondent, Esther, talked of the networks for hormone information exchange and procurement that she established while a member of The Wild Flowers. Esther stated that the majority of her female hormones were purchased from a source other than a pharmacy. She mentioned that Mexico continued to be a ready source of unprescribed hormones despite the United States' efforts to restrict their flow across the border. From the interviews and observations, it appeared that female hormones, their effects and ways to obtain them, were an important part of the lives of the heterosexual male-to-female respondents. Any attempt to understand the role that hormones play in changing the sexual orientation of heterosexual male-to-female transsexuals must consider their extensive and often illicit use by such persons.

AUTOGYNEPHILIA AND THE CHANGES IN SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Blanchard (1989) has suggested that autogynephilia (erotic arousal in men related to the image of themselves as women) is closely associated with nonhomosexual gender dysphoria. While autogynephilia may have played an influential role in their lives, the respondents in this study provided no reason to believe that autogynephilia, as currently conceptualized, was responsible for the changes in sexual orientation described above. The changes in sexual orientation described by the respondents went beyond autogynephilic fantasies and imagery and involved posttransitional sexual attractions towards males who had value as sexual and romantic partners in their own right. Becky related the following concerning the first time she met her boyfriend Cliff: "I saw this very good looking man, tall, handsome, great voice. I was kind of in a daze. I was transfixed by this guy! He was good looking, he had a nice build, he smelled good. I didn't know there were feelings like that. I never had them before."

Sherri's attraction to males held both sexual and personal significance:

[Making a sexual reference] I know something that would thrill me to death! I'm just being nasty now [laughs]. I consider myself a 51-year-old virgin and part of my burning desire is to be happily married and have a loving, caring husband who loves me for who I am and who cares about me. And I want to be able to return his love with gentleness and tenderness. I think it's every girl's dream to have a happy, married life, to have a nice husband. I really want that.

The respondents expressed desires for men as sexual and romantic partners that went beyond the autogynephilic thoughts and images described by Blanchard (1991). Furthermore, five of the 6 respondents who reported a change in their sexual orientation had actually acted upon their posttransitional sexual attractions towards males to various degrees. Two of these five were involved in long-term romantic relationships with males at the time of the study. In summary, it did not appear that the changes in the respondents' sexual orientation were similar to the autogynephilic images and fantasies described by Blanchard (1991).

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